

## The Transatlantic Transformation of Nyabingi and Muhumusa:

### From Kigezi to Jamaica via the ‘Babylonian’ Media

The question as to how and when the knowledge of Nyabingi and Muhumusa came to Jamaica from Kigezi, Uganda, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century does not appear to have been asked. There is no evidence of any direct contact between Kigezi (it had no slave raiders or slavery) and the American continent; it is likely that the knowledge was transmitted indirectly via newspapers. However it was distorted by misunderstanding, misinformation and propaganda which led to misinterpretation and, ultimately, the creation of new symbolic and cultural meanings among descendants of the African slave diaspora.

It seems that there was, from the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some general knowledge of Nyabingi-inspired Muhumusa among the multinational community associated with the Harlem Renaissance in the USA. In general any documented African leader that had resisted European conquest was given hero status. It's possible, for instance, that Marcus Garvey read of Muhumusa in the English press after her 1911 capture when he was in London, 1912-14. It is also possible that such articles were republished in North American papers. By contrast other Nyabingi-inspired resistance leaders<sup>1</sup> of Kigezi, 1911-28, are unknown in Jamaica as they received little or no media coverage.

The Muhumusa story was attractive to the English elite; from a distance her resistance as an alleged<sup>2</sup> royal to conquest seemed somewhat exotic, quaint and whimsical. European powers for practical reasons often incorporated existing and co-operative kings and chieftains into the colonial infrastructure after conquest especially where there was an affinity between the two<sup>3</sup>. Even Muhumusa was accorded benevolent status after her capture and exile to Kampala and received annual government grants<sup>4</sup>, the only resistance leader to have done so.

The next stage came in the mid-1934 with the publication of an article by an Italian journalist, Frederico Philos<sup>5</sup>, in an Austrian newspaper that claimed in a paranoid fantasy that

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<sup>1</sup> Kataregye and Ndochibiri are the two best known but there were many others

<sup>2</sup> Some local people believed it was her sister (since deceased) who was Rwabugiri's wife according to a 1912 English government report by Captain Reid (who had captured her the previous year); he also recommended that she be not appointed as a local chief due to strong resistance from clans who had suffered from her Nyabingi-motivated depredations

<sup>3</sup> Such as the Buganda of Lake Victoria who became second tier Uganda Protectorate's administrators

<sup>4</sup> £12 pa according to a 1938 colonial government assessment with a recommendation that it be doubled so she could comfortably remit her employees' poll tax obligations and give hospitality in accordance with her status

<sup>5</sup> Probably a pseudonym

Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, allied with Egypt and Liberia, had been elected in Moscow in 1930 to lead the Nya-Binghi Secret Order (allegedly founded in the 1920s by a nonexistent Congolese king) whose army of 190 million were dedicated to the elimination and eradication of the White Race. The translated article appeared in Canada and was reprinted in the *Jamaica Times*, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1935.

The Emperor was alleged to have stated “Death to the oppressors of the Black Races” and the plan was to starve the whites, and then annihilate them with weapons. They were also seeking an alliance with Japan; the author’s attempt to heighten the paranoia with reference to the ‘Yellow Peril’. He adds: “Wherever one mentions the word Negus<sup>6</sup> the eyes of the black gleam with a mad fanaticism. They worship him as an idol. He is their God. Todie for the Negus is to ensure admission to paradise. Bloody sacrifices are offered up to him.” The author appears to have had some USA connection as he refers to the alleged murder of a Ku Klux Klan officer and the storage of weapons in named US cities.

This crude piece of Fascist propaganda<sup>7</sup> had absolutely no basis in reality and was a pure invention; there never was any such meeting or alliance. Its aim was to justify Italy’s invasion and conquest of Ethiopia the following year. The translation of Nyabingi as ‘She who Destroys’ is spurious; how this author came upon the name Nyabingi is unknown, perhaps through some casual reading.

In Jamaica at this time there was major development of black culture and identity among the African-descended population driven by Marcus Garvey leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), who had been deported back from the USA in 1928, and building on the work of Kingston-based ministers of the American Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and other Afro-Protestant sects.

In 1930 the coronation of Haile Selassie (Ras Tafari) as Emperor of Ethiopia, the only surviving independent African ruler of the conquest of Africa by European powers, was a major inspiration to the growth of Black Consciousness Movement in the American continent and led ultimately to the creation of a Ras Tafari philosophy and theology in Jamaica that stated that the Emperor was an African Messiah to whom all Black people should make allegiance.

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<sup>6</sup> i.e. the Emperor

<sup>7</sup> Full text is here, pp. 87-90:

[https://www.academia.edu/4172471/Nyabinghi\\_The\\_Heartbeat\\_of\\_Rastafari\\_Dutch\\_Nederlands\\_](https://www.academia.edu/4172471/Nyabinghi_The_Heartbeat_of_Rastafari_Dutch_Nederlands_)

Many early leaders, i.e. Leonard Howell, Joseph Hibbert, Archibald Dunkley and Robert Hinds all appear to have lived in the USA and had previous links with the UNIA (and obscure organisations such as the Ancient Mystic Order of Ethiopia and the African Freemasonry Lodge) and probably had some passing knowledge of other well-known African heroes that resisted European conquest. Its influence grew with the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia by Italy and the 1938 Jamaican labour rebellion.

It was these early leaders who believed this article as truthful as the general connection between the article and Rasta is the translation of Nyabingi as a destroyer is taken directly from the article and found currently on all their literature and websites. It is commonly stated that 'nya/niya' = black and 'binghi' = victory<sup>8</sup>. It is likely that the adaptation of this specific meaning in conjunction with the development of Nya-men and Nya drum music was another motivation for the authorities to suppress Howell and the Pinnacle community.

The next development was the creation of the Nyabinghi Order. There is some confusion as to its foundation; some websites claim it is the oldest order in Jamaica but they do not give founders or dates so it is likely that this interpretation is conflated with her incorporation by Howell and other Rasta leaders. The second dates the order from the mid-1950s when Ras Boanerges (George Watson later Bongo Watts) founded the Youth Black Faith movement, c. 1947, that he subsequently renamed, c.1950, the Nyabinghi Order, possibly due to the influence of his unnamed mother who was an ardent Garveyite.

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century academic historical research into the African origins of Nyabingi and Muhumusa has been integrated into some Rasta literature. However some of these academic perspectives are debatable as many are based on early colonial and missionary misinterpretations that came from the resistance by agricultural mountain communities to conquest regardless of whether it was by African cattle or European war lords. For instance, there is no evidence that Nyabingi was ever an actual person and while Nyabingi was the main ideology of resistance there is no evidence that it was ever an organisation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> It is a word in the Rukiga language of SW Uganda & NW Rwanda. Nya is a common personal name prefix that designates female and bingi designates wealth; the combination translates as 'She who is wealthy' or 'She who gives wealth'. Nyabingi among Rukiga speakers was primarily a fertility goddess who complemented and opposed the male Ryangombe. In neighbouring Runyarwanda and associated Rufumbira language it is Nyabinshi. There is no relationship between Traditional African religion as represented by Nyabingi and Christianity in Ethiopia.

<sup>9</sup> See appendix

In conclusion the situation with Muhumusa (and her association with Nyabingi) is not clear without further research but it is likely that she became known on the basis of contemporary media reports of her arrest c.1911 as she did not appear in international media after that date. It appears that independently Nyabingi and the negative translation became part of early Rastafarian communities due to Italian Fascist anti-Ethiopian propaganda of 1934/5. Muhumusa's association with Nyabingi guaranteed her subsequent iconic, but junior, status within the Rastafarian community.<sup>10</sup>

It is intriguing that Nyabingi survives and prospers far from her home having travelled over 7,500 miles (12,000 km) from a Central African mountain range to a small Caribbean island; recreated in a new guise due to the unintended consequences of the 'Babylonian' media.

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## Appendix

Traditional religion in Africa was never organised like literacy-based religions such as Christianity (which includes Rastafari within the 'People of the Book' family) because it was orally transmitted, had no written word or set theology that required a priesthood and infrastructure to maintain it. In other words it was not a set of beliefs but an organic spiritual relationship within the ever-changing interplay between languages, cultures, agricultures and environments over centuries.

The other main difference of belief is that God is transcendent in contrast to literacy religions that believe in God's immanence. The Black African Trinity is a transcendent God, primary universal movers – female fertility and male power, and the minor powers. Female power is generally associated with agricultural clans led by rain-makers and male power with cattle clans. In Kigezi: Imana, Nyabingi and Ryangombe, and the Emandwa.

There has never been a recorded case of a religious war in sub-Saharan Africa; however that is not to say that religion wasn't politicised

When Rwandan cattle lords that pledged allegiance to Ryangombe attempted to conquer the Virunga Massif they were resisted by Nyabingi-inspired mountain clans. To these communities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was little difference between the conquest ideologies and male gods of Rwandans and Europeans.

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<sup>10</sup> For a modern example see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYP\\_hfjrGf8&feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYP_hfjrGf8&feature=share)

The invaders reacted similarly to Nyabingi-based resistance, the Rwandans through murder, the Europeans added imprisonment and exile; both burnt out homes and villages, confiscated livestock and property, destroyed crops, and kidnapped children. In addition, Christian missionaries suppressed Nyabingi as an evil idol of wicked paganism; while the Catholics subverted her into worship of Jesus' mother, Mary, Protestants sought to eradicate all pagan symbols completely, indirectly giving rise to the East African Revival (Balakole) which originated in the area in the 1930s.

Since the 1960s, most Kigezi people have converted to Christianity (and a few to Islam) largely due to the fact that education (and therefore employment) was and is only available in religious-run schools.

As a result Nyabingi (and most pre-colonial culture) has become history, forgotten except by a very small underground minority who keep her spirit alive through mediation, chanting and music.